

Huggers: The emergence of Allan Eastman

With over 100 TV productions and two feature films behind him, Allan Eastman, Canada's hardest-working director, feels the time has arrived to emerge from the workaday world and claim some recognition.

The reason? *Huggers*, Eastman's third feature, an Allegro Films and National Film Board coproduction, which completed principal photography Sept. 12, marks, says Eastman, the new, self-confident approach to current Canadian feature filmmaking.

Until *Huggers*, says Eastman, "I was just sort of happy doing the work and leaving it at that — and as long as the producers knew (about me), that was all that mattered."

Huggers "is a really interesting film; we're doing something really good and really special here, so I don't mind promoting it a bit," says Eastman whose quiet professionalism these past eight years has seen him mainly helming series from *The Littlest Hobo*, *Grizzly Adams*, *The Beachcombers*, *The Edison Twins* to *Danger Bay*.

Huggers, budgetted at \$1.65 million, is a story about the great Canadian theme — "communications. It's very much a romantic love story between this very eccentric kid that Kiefer (Sutherland) plays, and the deaf girl that Vanessa (Vaughan) plays." With the difference that *Huggers* co-star, 16-year-old Vaughan, in her screen debut, isn't just playing; she is deaf.

"It's fascinating," says Eastman, "that what is necessarily perceived as a handicap can be a strength. Because of her handicap she's an incredibly expressive person; her facial expressions for the picture are just outstanding. She's very good at conveying the different kinds of emotional states of her character because all of her life has been a struggle to communicate well."

The idea of a feature involving a deaf person goes back to a conversation almost a year ago between *Huggers* co-writers and co-producers Tom Berry of Allegro Films and Stefan Wodolawsky of the NFB (who played Blue in *90 Days*). Berry and Wodolawsky had together just produced *Blue Line*, a one-hour drama (which ran on U.S. and Canadian pay-TV this September), and everyone was happy. "We were happy with *Blue Line*, our investors were happy. So we were ready for the next one," Berry recalls. The upshot of their brainstorming was *Huggers*, a feature about deafness, often referred to as "the forgotten handicap", though it is estimated that one per 1,000 North Americans are deaf.

The search for an actress to play the part of Anne began in May, 1985, not long before Eastman arrived on the



Huggers' director Allan Eastman, with leads Kiefer Sutherland and Vanessa Vaughan

scene, just back from Yugoslavia where he had shot *The War Boy*, a feature for Toronto producer William Marshall, starring Kenneth Welsh and Helen Shaver.

After interviewing hundreds of people including trained actresses in Montreal and Toronto, Berry and Wodolawsky settled on Torontonian Vanessa Vaughan to play opposite Kiefer Sutherland (son of Donald), who himself had not long before had his own feature debut in *The Bay Boy*. With them appears Peter Spence, who had a supporting role in *Blue Line* and starred brilliantly in Don Owen's *Unfinished Business*.

But as Eastman, ever the professional, says, "You never know until you get them on the set and before the cameras." And what Eastman was bringing to the shoot was "a lot of professional discipline" and "a huge bag of tricks" carefully built up from his years of television work.

"My strong point as a director is storytelling. I like to use a very fast-moving style with a movie camera and the other part is I love working with actors. There are a lot of elements to this script — three major plotlines — and what I was doing was bringing all that together to make a smooth narrative."

Another thing Eastman brought to the *Huggers* shoot was what one could call the 'Toronto style' — "a tighter, faster, slicker kind of activity."

"This is a gross generalization, of course, but I get the impression that things proceed at a little more relaxed shooting pace in Montreal. I always know what I want when I go in. In my style, I like to try to not come back to the same shot — so every shot in the movie is a different shot and that, you know, requires a lot of set-ups.

"We got it up to about 20-22 (daily set-ups), which is about what I need. Shooting television, especially a lot of

action television, it's not uncommon to get to 35 (set-ups). With a feature like this, which calls for a lot more precise performance with the shot, with the lighting, 20 is pretty outstanding."

If *Huggers* was initially set up financially with Telefilm Broadcast Fund money and CFCF-TV participation as a television feature, Eastman says "All of us believe we're going to make a good enough picture here that we'll get a good theatrical release next summer. I think we're all going towards a good commercial release."

Born 36 years ago in Winnipeg, Eastman, after graduating from the University of Manitoba, went on to post-graduate studies in England in 1972 at the University of Bristol Film School. "It was basically a totally practical production course — they threw you in over your head and you surfaced 16 weeks later knowing how to make a film."

Like many an aspiring young filmmaker, head sodden with the French New Wave — "It wasn't until later I realized they'd stolen their best ideas from the great American directors" — Eastman too would make that first feature, *A Sweeter Song* in 1976, a \$125,000 film "that only got made because I wouldn't take no for an answer." A parody of the great Canadian loser — "the angst-ridden boy drinking himself to death, isolated against the wilderness" — the film starred actors and actresses whose names are well-known today: Nick Mancuso, Susan Hogan, Jim Henshaw. He's not sure whether the film's criticism of the Canadian film establishment helped or hurt his career, but Eastman wouldn't touch another feature until this year's two — *War Boy* and *Huggers*.

"What I really wanted was to work a lot, work with my craft and get really good at it. And that's essentially what I've been doing for eight to 10 years now," says Eastman, self-confessed workaholic, adding — immodestly but

not untruthfully — that "basically I've been working more than anybody else in this country in the last five years — and it's certainly showing itself now. People have known me as the best TV director in the country, and I hope soon I'll be known as a feature director. I'm very optimistic," says Allan Eastman.

With *Huggers* now in the can, the rest of us will have to wait just a little longer to see for ourselves.

Michael Dorland •

Danger Bay: Thrills on land, sea, and air

Danger Bay is filmed on land, sea and in the air — in Vancouver, on the coastal waters, in the forests and rugged interior regions of British Columbia. For the 50-member crew and the cast, it represents a gruelling five-month schedule of non-stop filming — one episode a week for a total of 22 weeks. At least 75% of the show is filmed on location, with the remainder shot in the company's Burnaby studios.

The action-adventure format calls for an impressive number of boats, planes, helicopters, stunt and safety people, air-and-sea rescue teams and technical expertise. Much of *Danger Bay's* action takes place on the water and, for this, a veritable ocean-going studio has been created. This floating island includes a main barge for the generator/lighting and grip truck, a dressing-room trailer and a smaller barge which also serves as a helicopter-landing pad. The fleet of



boats includes the main camera boat, the 37-ft. Silver Gale; a high-speed camera boat; several zodiacs; an 18-ft. Boston Whaler and "The Northstar" picture boat, an ex-fishing trawler owned by Danger Bay Productions.

"Probably one of the most difficult aspects is created by the weather-tidal situation," says Stan Olsen, one of the eight *Danger Bay* directors. "You're shooting and suddenly find yourself in a four-foot sea, the camera boat disappears behind a swell and all you can see is water. Another problem can be actors or crew getting seasick, although that hasn't been the case on this show."

What stunts take special coordination and expertise? On the two-part episode titled "A New Beginning," for example, there was a fairly complicated series of stunts, one in particular which involved two men jumping from a moving helicopter onto a moving boat. In that instance, medical personnel were standing by on the boat, the nearest hospital emergency room was on alert and the coastguard hovercraft (which was also in the scene) remained nearby.

Of course, it's not all stunts. Some episodes, such as "The Bathtub Race," represent a *tour-de-force* of logistics and timing. The annual Bathtub Race, from Vancouver Island, 58 kilometres to the mainland, is an event that attracts thousands of spectators, hundreds of boats, international competitors and media attention. *Danger Bay* used three camera boats, on land, sea and air, to capture the event. Principal actors and crew were flown to Vancouver Island and filmed "entering" the race. The actors were then flown quickly back to Vancouver while three boat "doubles" were shot in the actual race. The tricky part came at the finish line. Series star Donnelly Rhodes had to land on the beach, run up to the winners' platform and ring the traditional bell, only 15 minutes before the real winner arrived. It was definitely a one-shot deal - it would have been impossible to repeat the thousands of "extras" on the beaches and in the water. The filming went so well that fiction nearly triumphed over fact. The exuberant fans mistakenly assumed that Rhodes was the winner of the race and cheered

madly upon his arrival. When the real winner arrived a short time later, many refused to believe he was legitimate.

Although most of *Danger Bay* is shot in the greater Vancouver area, two episodes required major location moves for cast and crew. For "Trouble On The Range", the film unit had to be transported, by air and land, to the town of Kamloops, 425 kilometers into the BC interior. There, only 20 minutes from town, the unit filmed at the Harper Ranch, a fabulous 60,000-acre spread of mountains, bluffs, boxed canyons and range-lands right out of the "wild west." From the main ranch house and corrals, *Danger Bay* vehicles, trailers and trucks had to cross several miles of open cow pastures on dirt tracks, stopping frequently to avoid the bovine residents on the path.

The shoot was not entirely without incident. One day, after most of the crew and cast had gone back to the main ranch for lunch, director Stan Olsen and Donnelly Rhodes became stranded in the middle of a pasture and had to abandon their vehicle, a police car, with a flat tire. They started out on foot and, by the time rescue arrived, were stranded in the pasture, their path blocked by a resident bull who was eyeing Olsen's red jacket with considerable interest. Later one of the A.D.'s was rushed to hospital with an allergic reaction to a bee-sting and art department members had an unpleasantly close encounter with a rattlesnake while dressing the set.

From Kamloops, the unit moved to the famed Whistler ski-resort area, about 122 kilometers from Vancouver, to film the "White Water" episode. The transportation department had the challenging task of taking company trucks, vans and trailers on a hair-raising nine-hour "short cut" across the mountains. The former logging road, along sheer cliffs and steep inclines, was an extremely rugged route which required steady nerves and superior driving skills. Near Whistler, the locations included the stunningly beautiful glacier-fed Green Lake and the Chekamus River, with its spectacular white-water rapids.

The river, which had been previously

surveyed and mapped out by location scouts and water-safety experts, proved to be one of the most challenging shoots of the season. The advance crew, in preparing the area, barely avoided disaster when a sudden landslide caused boulders to come crashing down the steep incline and forced several people to jump into the river to escape the hurtling rocks. Later, ropes were secured to aid the crew in climbing down the extremely steep cliffs with cameras and equipment. The episode was shot with two units; the second unit filming the more dangerous white-water stunts while the main unit shot simultaneously at Green Lake. There were three stunt doubles and three water safety/white water-experts who provided everything from rafts to ropes. In this instance, everybody worked from a storyboard, because of the detailed involvement and the water-safety factor, which played a key role. "It's not often on a TV series that one has the luxury of a storyboard," says director Michael Berry. "This aided us tremendously and saved a great deal of time because we had only four days to shoot the entire location portion."

The weather provided further challenges. As it was late fall and the location was several thousand feet above sea-level, ice had to be scraped off windshields in the early mornings. For the actors and stunt people, wet-suits worn under clothing became a lifesav-

ing necessity. It was particularly rough going for Donnelly Rhodes, Christopher Crabb, 15 and guest-star Jason Michas, 13. The three actors gamely spent strenuous hours in the rapids for the close-up sequences, carefully watched by water-safety experts and anxious mothers. Director Berry had to use a megaphone to be heard above the roar of the rapids while the camera operators and the rest of the crew clambered around slippery rocks in hip-waders. In the end, it was worth it. When the resulting footage was screened at rushes in the hotel, it occasioned spontaneous applause and heartfelt cheering. The white-water segments were pronounced as spectacular as any ever seen on feature film.

The *Danger Bay* crew and cast, aside from dealing with the rigours of the wilderness, also contend with a great variety of animals. Some of the wildlife "guest star" menagerie this season included sea lions, an orangutang, skunks, snakes, a Bengal tiger, and, of course, Danger the otter and the Vancouver Aquarium whales, who by now are *Danger Bay* veterans.

When *Danger Bay* wraps at the end of October, the production crew can look back on a long, exhausting and rewarding haul. And many of them can look forward to working on something easy for a change - like a movie.

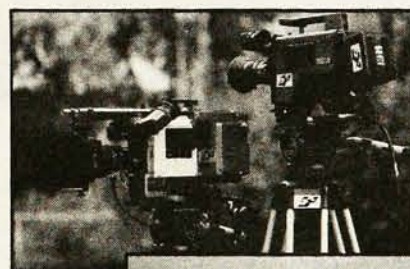
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